HUMAN-ANIMAL-NATURE INTERACTIONS: ECOCRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON SELECT INDIAN AND CANADIAN WRITERS

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Abstract

This thesis entitled, **Human-Animal-Nature Interactions: Ecocritical Perspectives on Select Indian and Canadian Writers** attempts to examine an ecocritical investigation of human-animal-nature interactions through select texts of the writers from two different countries, India and Canada, sharing different cultural perspectives. From the Indian context, this thesis will examine the works of Ruskin Bond and Amitav Ghosh. At the same time, from the Canadian territory, the writers relevant to the research questions are Alice Munro and Yann Martel, respectively. Writers from both nations have depicted their understandings of human, animal, and nature interactions and shared the same opinion that the anthropocentric arrogance has rendered the two agencies of the ecosphere, namely nature and animals, as 'Other'. This thesis tries to investigate how almost all the selected narratives for this research work evoke the sense of how anthropocentric domination over the world of flora and fauna imparts a destructive impact on ecological balance, and threatens the organic unity of the existing environment, resulting in serious questions of survival for both humans and the nonhuman world. Through the theories of posthumanism, this thesis also investigates how the authors from different countries depict the same regressive pattern of human attitudes towards the world of nature and animals. Rejecting the notions of animals as the co-dwellers of this universe and turning a blind eye to nature's vitality, the decaying consciousness of human beings may lead us towards an ecological collapse or an unseen apocalypse. This thesis tries to find out the ways through which the themes of cohabitation, coexistence, and mutual survival can be possible through raising ecological concerns and relevant questions about environmental awareness.

The opening chapter, entitled **“But I don’t want comfort. I want God…I want sin”: Exploring the Relationship between Culture and Nature,** studies the apparatuses of culture that frame human understandings of nature and influence their overviews regarding nature and the living animals around them. Starting from the medieval Judeo-Christian theology to the Great Chain of Being, from the Renaissance Humanism up to the Rational Humanism, we have seen how the autocratic cult of anthropocentrism had muted the spaces of nature and the animals. This study also critiques the cultural construction of nature as stereotypes (Eden, Arcadia, Pastoral,

Wilderness) based on human understanding and expectations, as well as animals as inferior to human beings. Ecocriticism as a contemporary theory appears as a counter to this discourse by advocating for an equal space for every being that exists in an ecosphere. As a theory, ecocriticism arbitrates between the two agencies: human and nonhuman. From the Indian context, a similar theory has emerged out which was called Tinai theory of the ancient Sangam literature. Nirmal Selvamony defends the aesthetics of this theory by making it more invincible as it connects humans, nonhumans with the concept of the sacred. This triad frames the cultural basis of Indian thought and their negotiations with the world of nature and the animal.

This study also focuses on how the idea of nature is constructed in Canadian consciousness, or more specifically, the idea of wilderness, which was fermented in Canadian narratives even before it agitated the American minds. Similarly, nature in Indian culture is adored as a revered figure, binding the bond of human and nonhuman within natural spaces. Following the foundations of Tinai theory, and as the grand narratives articulate, Indian culture is inclusive of all living and non-living beings. Be it the animal incarnations of Vishnu, or the vahanas associated with the deities, be it the five formative elements of human beings, or the enchanting world of Vanaspati, all the components of Vasudha demand veneration as we all are emanated from the same source, Brahma: the Creator. But despite such an enriched and exalted culture, the rapid growth of industry and technology in the modern age nullified the presence of nature and animals as co-dwellers for human greed over economic prospects in Indian territory, too. The limitless human greed becomes a threat to the environment and fellow dwellers on the Earth. To resist this anthropocentric juggernaut over natural communities, causing environmental degradation, this thesis advocates for a general space where human nature and the animal world can coexist and flourish together.

Ecocriticism challenges the anthropocentric tenets existing within human culture and celebrates life within all beings of an ecosphere. This particular theory inspires us to reinterpret our cultural texts and reframe our understanding of nature and the animals' world by placing equal value on the entities existing in an ecosystem. This thesis examines the short stories of Ruskin Bond and Alice Munro, along with the narratives of Amitav Ghosh and Yann Martel, to set up an understanding between the human and

nonhuman world, which can inspire thoughts of coexistence and mutual dependence, thus framing a biocentric society. This thesis also supports the ideas of utilisation of nature for human need, those who are dependent upon nature's abundant stores.

The second chapter, **“What immortal hand or eye dare frame thy fearful symmetry?”: Discussing ‘their’ Tales of Coexistence and Survival through Select Short Stories of Ruskin Bond** focuses on Ruskin Bond's short stories that provide rich insights into the field of ecocriticism. Bond's anthropomorphic quality animates nature as a living presence and justifies the presence of the animals alongside human existence. Nature's vitality and its healing aptitudes are stressed with spiritual and aesthetic benefits. The stories analysed in this thesis highlight the mutual harmony between species and coexistence in adverse and vulnerable territories, too. The survival instincts of both human beings and animals are equally emphasized. The stories also criticise the blazing crisis of deforestation and unstoppable mining that leads to ecological disaster, as well as the heinous ethical crimes like poaching and hunting for fun, thus vexing the animal world. Along with ecocriticism, posthumanistic traits are also evident in Bond's literary vision.

The third chapter is entitled as **"and when all the wars are over, a butterfly will still be beautiful": Framing the Impact of the Wilderness on the Civilised through Select Short Stories of Alice Munro.** Stories of Alice Munro redefine our conceptions about wilderness and the presentation of animals in literary texts. In the 'short fictions' of Munro, human-animal and nature interact quite differently from Bond. The animals are not anthropomorphised here; rather, they interact as an active participant and are treated as the co-dwellers of this earth along with human beings. Munro describes the benefits of animals' presence in human lives, imposing individuality upon them. Rejecting the convention of animals as the stock characters, some stories concentrate on the animals as the principal characters, too. In Munro's narratives, the projection of nature is enigmatic; be it the wilderness or the barren tracts, the natural settings serve as spaces of reflection and character development as well as an unfathomable antagonist. Human perceptions of nature are disrupted in the narratives of Munro. Munro discards the eulogising representation of nature; rather, in her narratives, nature acts as a catalyst, shaping the characters' emotional states. While Bond's nature is always seen as a benevolent force, Munro's narration is deceptive.

The conflict between civilisation and wilderness is prominent in every text. Nature also acts as a stimulator in the stories, thus bringing out the human emotions and frustrations to the fore. But Munro's short fictions also criticise the environmental issues like deforestation for framing a modernized society. In her handling of animals, quite contrarily, Munro's realistic animals play as metaphors of the human vices and virtues. Munro never humanises animals; rather, she animalises human beings, and thus disturbs the human/nonhuman binaries. This thesis studies all these traits in the light of ecocriticism and posthumanism.

The fourth chapter of this thesis is entitled as **"The forest is generous, the forest is kind; but woe to those who are greedy or blind": Searching for Lines, if any, between Need and Greed through *Jungle Nama: A Story of Sundarban*.** Amitav Ghosh's *Jungle Nama* juxtaposes human greed and human need concerning deep environmental consciousness. Centring upon the Bon Bibi-Dokkhin Rai legend around Sundarbans, Ghosh's narrative presents the dichotomy between Dukhey's need and Dhona's greed only to uphold the relevant environmental concerns. Ghosh presents Bon Bibi as a mediator between need and greed and thus confirming social stability and justice in Sundarbans. Ghosh's presentation of Dokkhin Rai as an antagonist also draws scholarly attention. Dokkhin Rai's claim over the Sundarbans Forest as his sole kingdom justifies the territorial clash between animals and human beings. Side by side, this text can be treated as one of the seminal texts upon posthumanism, as there are some evidences where Bon Bibi in her initial fight with Dokkhin Rai, even after defeating him miserably through Shah Jongoli, did not slay the animal, but created individual spaces by drawing respective boundaries inside the jungles for Dokkhin Rai and the human world. Thus, Bon Bibi also settles the conflict between animal and human rights over the forest's riches through a charter of need and greed. Bon Bibi even acts as an arbitrator between Dukhey and Dhona. Dukhey could have avenged Dhona on his return, but Bon Bibi restricted his instincts only to restore peace between them. The end of the narrative is fascinating as Dokkhin Rai too, for the benevolent influence of Bon Bibi and dwipodi-poyar metre, considers Dukhey as his brother, and the human-animal bond is consolidated firmly. Apart from ecological concerns and advocating for a balance between need and greed, this chapter strongly suggests the theoretical aspects from Ramachandra Guha's 'Environmentalism of the Poor' too, which supports the disbursement of natural

resources for the fulfilment of the basic needs of those dependent on forests for their livelihood.

The fifth chapter of this thesis is entitled as **"Strongest is the man who stands alone": Relocating Human Beings' Constant Struggle for Survival amidst Changing Natural Spaces through *Life of Pi***. This chapter focuses on the perennial ideas of Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*. The novel connects India and Canada through a textual migration. The sudden narrative shift from Pondicherry to Canada over the Pacific, unties many unseen rather strange layers of human-animal relationship and their mutual struggle for survival over the Pacific Ocean. The main plot of this novel unravels amid the Pacific Ocean, when Tsimsum started to collapse amidst the watery surge, thus leaving behind a lifeboat equally shared by a wounded zebra, a hyena, a royal Bengal tiger, and a lone human being. The crisis of this story starts with their equal struggle for survival against the individual needs, against the sharks and whales lurking amidst the water, and against the threats from external nature. Martel disturbs all the accepted notions of predator-prey relationship often seen in the land, and focuses on the constantly shifting power structures amidst the ocean for survival. Not only the presence of the carnivorous animals on the boat and the blood-loving sharks, Martel's predators also include a blind man who tried to cannibalize Pi, the agitated ocean, as well as the floating carnivorous island.

Discarding all the notions of an anthropocentric model, this novel concentrates on the traits of posthumanism and biocentrism. Human, Animal, and Nature function simultaneously to make their presence more prominent than the other two. Nature, as a violent as well as a provider of sustenance, plays a vital role in the odyssey of Pi and Richard Parker. Amidst a myriad of adversities over the Pacific Ocean, with fierce animals like hyenas and a royal Bengal tiger, along with the threats of sharks and whales, Pi finally manages to touch the shores within a single boat and rescues his sole companion, Richard Parker, the royal Bengal tiger. It is interesting to note that, quite miraculously, Martel reversed the roles in the narrative. Pi's transformation from a vegetarian to the level of a cannibal for survival, and Richard Parker's grip over his inherent instincts are brilliantly executed by the novelist. Pi's ferality or descending into one's primitive self and Richard Parker's rationality are stressed in the text. Apart from these, this narrative champions the theme of interspecies relationships along

with a sense of harmony, coexistence, mutual interdependence, and survival amidst changing natural threats. Martel radically changes the human-nonhuman divides and rebuilds the human-nonhuman relationship through the intimate relationship between Richard Parker and Pi. In the end, when Richard Parker left Pi without any formal goodbye, Pi was shattered from inside and plunged into an indescribable sorrow. It is his irony of fate that, once this same tiger was a threat to his life, but during their voyage, Richard Parker became his only companion who also shared the equal miseries and threats on the perilous journey over the Pacific Ocean. Segregation from him unsettles Pi with profound pathos. This shows how the human-nonhuman threads are brilliantly woven with ecocritical consciousness and posthuman perspectives in the text.

“No social stability without individual stability”: Acknowledging the Symbiosis of the Brave Living World is the final chapter of this thesis that argues in favour of a biocentric society that places equal value on every individual species and speaks for a 'brave new world'. All the authors analysed in this research use similar motives of environmental awareness and ecological concerns. They criticised the overexploitation of natural resources, alongside supporting the extraction of natural resources within limits and animal killing for their sustenance. The authors berate the marginalization of the nonhuman world on every page, and preach for a symbiotic relationship between these three agencies while concentrating on the themes of individual stability, which will surely lead towards social stability.

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